

## A DRAMATIC POINT.

BY ROBERT BARR,

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IN the bad days of Balmaceda, when Chili was rent in twain, and its capital was practically a besieged city, two actors walked together along the chief street of the place towards the one theatre that was then open. They belonged to a French dramatic company that would gladly have left Chili if it could; but being compelled by stress of war to remain, the company did the next best thing, and gave performances at the principal theatre on such nights as a paying audience came.

A stranger would hardly have suspected, by the look of the streets, that a deadly war was going on, and that the rebels—so called—were almost at the city gates. Although business was ruined, credit dead, and no man's life or liberty safe, the streets were filled with a crowd that seemed bent on enjoyment and making the best of things.

As Jacques Dupré and Carlos Lemoine walked together they were talking earnestly, not of the real war so close to their doors, but of the mimic conflicts of the stage. M. Dupré was the leading man of the company, and he listened with the amused tolerance of an elder man to the energetic vehemence of the younger.

"You are all wrong, Dupré," cried Lemoine, "all wrong! I have studied the subject. Remember I am saying nothing against your acting in general. You know you have no greater admirer than I am, and that is something to say when you know that the members of a dramatic company are usually at loggerheads through jealousy."

"Speak for yourself, Lemoine. You know I am green with jealousy of you. You are the rising star, and I am setting. You can't teach an old dog new tricks, Carl, my boy."

"That's nonsense, Dupré. I wish you would consider this seriously. It is because you are so good on the stage that I can't bear to see you false to your art just to please the gallery. You should be above all that."

"How can a man be above his gallery—the highest spot in the house? Talk sense, Carlos, and I'll listen."

"Yes, you're flippant simply because you know you're wrong, and dare not argue this matter soberly. Now she stabs you through the heart—"

"No. False premises entirely. She says something about my wicked heart, and evidently *intends* to pierce that depraved organ; but a woman never hits what she aims at, and I deny that I'm ever stabbed through the heart. Say in the region or the neighborhood of the heart, and go on with your talk."

"Very well. She stabs you in a spot so vital that you die in a few minutes. You throw up your hands, you stagger against the mantel-shelf, you tear open your collar and then grope at nothing; you press your hands on your wound and take two reeling steps forward; you call feebly for help and stumble against the sofa which you fall upon, and finally, still groping wildly, you roll off on the floor, where you kick out once or twice; your clinched hand comes down with a thud on the boards, and all is over."

"Admirably described, Carlos. I wish my audience paid such attention to my efforts as you do. Now, you claim this is all wrong, do you?"

"All wrong."

"Suppose she stabbed you, what would you do?"

"I would plunge forward on my face—dead."

"Great Heavens! What would become of your curtain?"

"Oh, bother the curtain!"

"It's all very well for you to condemn the curtain, Carl, but you must work up to it. Your curtain would come down, and your friends in the gallery would not know what had happened. Now, I go through the evolutions you so graphically describe, and the audience gets time to take in the situation. They say, chuckling to themselves, 'That villain's got his dose at last, and serves him right, too.' They want to enjoy his struggles, while she stands grimly at the door taking care that he doesn't get away. Then when my fist comes down flop on the stage, and they realize that I am indeed done for, the yell of triumph

that goes up is something delicious to hear."

"That's just the point, Dupré. I claim the actor has no right to hear applause—that he should not know there is such a thing as an audience. His business is to portray life exactly as it is."

"You can't portray life in a death scene, Carl."

"Dupré, I lose all patience with you, or rather I would did I not know that you are much deeper than you would have us suppose. You apparently won't see that I am very much in earnest about this."

"Of course you are, my boy, and that is one reason why you will become a very great actor. I was ambitious myself once; but as we grow older"—Dupré shrugged his shoulders—"well, we begin to have an eye on the box-office receipts. I think you sometimes forget that I am a good deal older than you are."

"You mean that I am a fool and that I may learn wisdom with age. I quite admit that you are a better actor than I am; in fact, I said so only a moment ago, but—"

"You wrong me, Brutus; I said an older soldier, not a better. But I will take you on your own grounds. Have you ever seen a man stabbed or shot through the heart?"

"I never have, but I know mighty well he wouldn't undo his necktie afterwards."

Dupré threw back his head and laughed.

"Who is flippant now?" he asked. "I don't undo my necktie; I merely tear off my collar, which a dying man may surely be permitted to do. But until you have seen a man die from such a stab as I receive every night, I don't understand how you can justly find fault with my rendition of the tragedy. I imagine, you know, that the truth lies between the two extremes. The man done to death would likely not make such a fuss as I make; nor would he depart so quickly as you say he would, without giving the gallery gods a show for their money. But here we are at the theatre, Carlos, and this acrimonious debate is closed—until we take our next walk together."

In front of the theatre soldiers were on duty, marching up and down with muskets on their shoulders, to show that the state was mighty and could take care of a theatre as well as conduct a war. There were many loungers about, which might have indicated to a person who did not know, that there would be a good house when the play began. The two actors

met the manager in the throng near the door.

"How are prospects to-night?" asked Dupré.

"Very poor," replied the manager. "Not half a dozen seats have been sold."

"Then it isn't worth while beginning?"

"We must begin," said the manager, lowering his voice. "The President has ordered me not to close the theatre."

"Oh, hang the President!" cried Lemoine impatiently. "Why doesn't he put a stop to the war, and then the theatre would remain open of its own accord?"

"He is doing his best to put a stop to the war, only his army does not carry out his orders as implicitly as our manager does," said Dupré, smiling at the other's vehemence.

"Balmaceda is a fool," retorted the younger actor. "If he were out of the way the war would not last another day. I believe he is playing a losing game, anyhow. It's a pity he hasn't to go to the front himself, and then a stray bullet might find him and put an end to the war, which would save the lives of many better men."

"I say, Lemoine, I wish you wouldn't talk like that," expostulated the manager gently, "especially when there are so many listeners."

"Oh, the larger my audience the better I like it," rejoined Lemoine. "I have all an actor's vanity in that respect. I say what I think, and I don't care who hears me."

"Yes; but you forget that we are, in a measure, guests of this country, and we should not abuse our hosts, or the man who represents them."

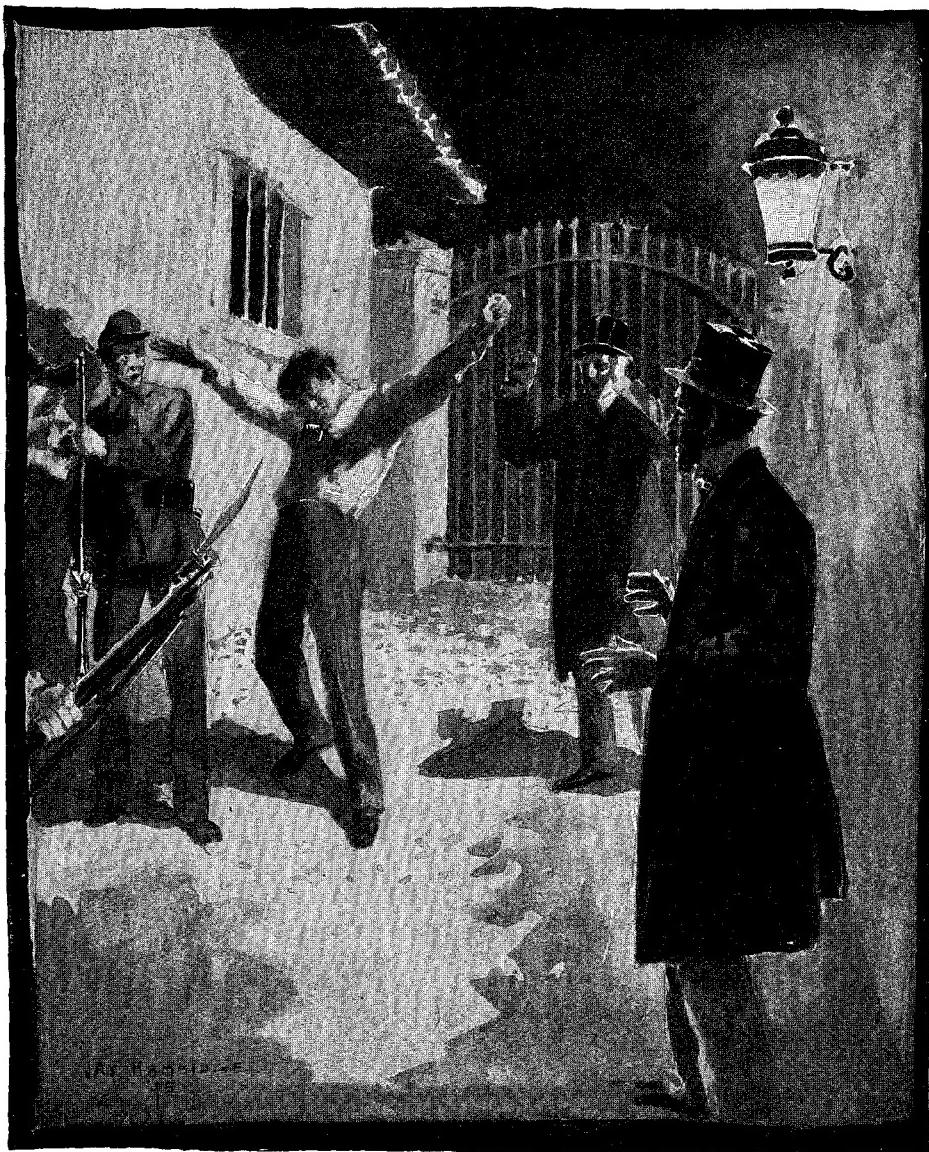
"Ah, does he represent them? It seems to me that begs the whole question; that's just what the war is about. The general opinion is that Balmaceda misrepresents them, and that the country would be glad to be rid of him."

"That may all be," said the manager almost in a whisper, for he was a man evidently inclined towards peace; "but it does not rest with us to say so. We are French, and I think therefore it is better not to express an opinion."

"I'm not French," cried Lemoine. "I'm a native Chilian, and I have a right to abuse my own country if I choose to do so."

"All the more reason, then," said the manager, looking timorously over his shoulder—"all the more reason that you should be careful what you say."

"I suppose," said Dupré, by way of



"MY GOD!—YOU WERE RIGHT—AFTER ALL."

putting an end to the discussion, "it is time for us to get our war paint on. Come along, Lemoine, and lecture me on our mutual art, and stop talking politics—if the nonsense you utter about Chili and its President is politics."

The two actors entered the theatre; they occupied the same dressing-room, and the volatile Lemoine talked incessantly. Although there were but few people in the stalls, the gallery was well filled, as was usually the case. When going on for the last act in the final scene, Dupré whispered a word to the man who controlled the falling of the curtain; and when the actor, as the villain of the piece, received the fatal

knife-thrust from the ill-used heroine, he plunged forward on his face and died without a struggle, to the amazement of the manager, who was watching the play from the front of the house, and to the evident bewilderment of the gallery, who had counted on an exciting struggle with death. Much as they desired the cutting off of the villain, they were not pleased to see him so suddenly shift his worlds without an agonizing realization of the fact that he was quitting an existence in which he had done nothing but evil. The curtain came down upon the climax, but there was no applause, and the audience silently filtered out into the street.

"There," said Dupré, when he returned to his dressing-room, "I hope you are satisfied now, Lemoine, and if you are, you are the only satisfied person in the house. I fell perfectly flat, as you suggested, and you must have seen that the climax of the play fell flat also."

"Nevertheless," persisted Lemoine stoutly, "it was the true rendition of the part."

As they were talking, the manager came into their dressing-room. "Good Heavens, Dupré!" he said, "why did you end the piece in that idiotic way? What on earth got into you?"

"The knife," said Dupré, flippantly. "It went directly through the heart, and Lemoine, here, insists that when that happens a man should fall dead instantly. I did it to please Lemoine."

"But you spoiled your curtain," protested the manager.

"Yes; I knew that would happen, and I told Lemoine so; but he insists on art for art's sake. You must expostulate with Lemoine; although I don't mind telling you both frankly that I don't intend to die in that way again."

"Well, I hope not," replied the manager. "I don't want you to kill the play as well as yourself, you know, Dupré."

Lemoine, whose face had by this time become restored to its normal appearance, retorted hotly:

"It all goes to show how we are surrounded and hampered by the traditions of the stage. The gallery wants to see a man die all over the place, and so the victim has to scatter the furniture about and make a fool of himself generally, when he should quietly succumb to a well-deserved blow. You ask any physician, and he will tell you that a man stabbed or shot through the heart collapses at once. There is no jumping-jack business in such a case. He doesn't play at leap-frog with the chairs and sofas, but sinks instantly to the floor and is done for."

"Come along, Lemoine," cried Dupré, putting on his coat, "and stop talking nonsense. True art consists in a judicious blending of the preconceived ideas of the gallery with the actual facts of the case. An instantaneous photograph of a trotting horse is doubtless technically and absolutely correct, yet it is not a true picture of the animal in motion."

"Then you admit," said Lemoine quickly, "that I am technically correct in what I state about the result of such a wound?"

"I admit nothing," said Dupré. "I don't believe you are correct in anything you say about the matter. I suppose the truth is that no two men die alike under the same circumstances."

"They do when the heart is touched."

"What absurd nonsense you talk! No two men act alike when the heart is touched in love; why then should they when it is touched in death? Come along to the hotel, and let us stop this idiotic discussion."

"Ah!" sighed Lemoine, "you will throw your chances away. You are too careless, Dupré; you do not study enough. This kind of thing is all well enough in Chili, but it will wreck your chances when you go to Paris. If you studied more deeply, Dupré, you would take Paris by storm."

"Thanks," said Dupré lightly; "but unless the rebels take this city by storm, and that shortly, we may never see Paris again. To tell the truth, I have no heart for anything but the heroine's knife. I am sick and tired of the situation here."

As Dupré spoke they met a small squad of soldiers coming briskly towards the theatre. The man in charge evidently recognized them, for saying a word to his men, they instantly surrounded the two actors. The sergeant touched Lemoine on the shoulder, and said:

"It is my duty to arrest you, sir."

"In Heaven's name, why?" asked Lemoine.

The man did not answer; but a soldier stepped to each side of Lemoine.

"Am I under arrest also?" asked Dupré.

"No."

"By what authority do you arrest my friend?" inquired Dupré.

"By the President's order."

"But where is your authority? Where are your papers? Why is this arrest made?"

The sergeant shook his head and said:

"We have the orders of the President, and that is sufficient for us. Stand back, please!"

The next instant Dupré found himself alone, with the squad and their prisoner disappearing down a back street. For a moment he stood there as if dazed, then he turned and ran as fast as he could back to the theatre again, hoping to meet a carriage for hire on the way. Arriving at the theatre he found the lights out and the manager on the point of leaving.

"Lemoine has been arrested," he cried;

"arrested by a squad of soldiers whom we met, and they said they acted by the order of the President."

The manager seemed thunderstruck by the intelligence, and gazed helplessly at Dupré.

"What is the charge?" he said at last.

"That I do not know," answered the actor. "They simply said they were acting under the President's orders."

"This is bad, as bad as can be," said the manager, looking over his shoulder, and speaking as if in fear. "Lemoine has been talking recklessly. I never could get him to realize that he was in Chili, and that he must not be so free in his speech. He always insisted that this was the nineteenth century, and a man could say what he liked; as if the nineteenth century had anything to do with Chili in its present state."

"You don't imagine," said Dupré, with a touch of pallor coming into his cheeks, "that this is anything serious? It will mean nothing more than a day or two in prison, at the worst?"

The manager shook his head and said:

"We had better get a carriage and see the President as soon as possible. I'll undertake to send Lemoine back to Paris, or to put him on board one of the French iron-clads. But there is no time to be lost. We can probably get a carriage in the square."

They found a carriage, and drove as quickly as they could to the residence of the President. At first they were refused admittance; but finally they were allowed to wait in a small room while their message was taken to Balmaceda. An hour passed, but still no invitation came to them from the President. The manager sat silent in a corner, but Dupré paced up and down the small room, torn with anxiety about his friend. At last an officer entered the room, and presented them with the compliments of the President, who regretted that it was impossible for him to see them that night. He added for their information, by order of the President, that Lemoine was to be shot at day-break. He had been tried by court-martial, and condemned to death for sedition. The President regretted having kept them waiting so long, but the court-martial had been going on when they arrived, and the President thought that perhaps they would be interested in the verdict. With that the officer escorted the two dumfounded men to the door, where they got into their carriage without a word. The

moment they were out of ear-shot, the manager said to the coachman:

"Drive as quickly as you can to the residence of the French minister."

Every one at the French Legation had retired when the two panic-stricken men reached there; but after a time the secretary consented to see them, and on learning the seriousness of the case, he undertook to arouse his Excellency, and see if anything could be done. The minister entered the room shortly after, and listened with interest to what they had to say.

"You have your carriage at the door?" he asked, when they had finished their recital.

"Yes."

"Then I will take it, and see the President at once. Perhaps you will wait here until I return."

Another hour dragged its slow length along, and they were well into the second hour before the rattle of the wheels was heard in the silent street. The minister came in, and the two anxious men saw by his face that he had failed in his mission.

"I am sorry to say," said his Excellency, "that I have been unable even to get the execution postponed. I did not understand, when I undertook the mission, that M. Lemoine was a citizen of Chili. You see, that fact puts the matter entirely out of my hands. I am powerless. I could only advise the President not to carry out his intentions; but he is to-night in a most unreasonable and excited mood, and I fear nothing can be done to save your friend. If he had been a citizen of France, of course this execution would not have been permitted to take place; but as it is, it is not our affair. M. Lemoine seems to have been talking with some indiscretion. He does not deny it himself, nor does he deny his citizenship. If he had taken a conciliatory attitude at the court-martial the result might not have been so disastrous; but it seems that he insulted the President to his face, and predicted that he would within two weeks meet him in Hades. The utmost I could do was to get the President to sign a permit for you to see your friend, if you present it at the prison before the execution takes place. I fear you have no time to lose. Here is the paper."

Dupré took the document, and thanked his Excellency for his exertions on their behalf. He realized that Lemoine had sealed his own fate by his independence and lack of tact.

The two dejected men drove from the Legation and through the deserted streets to the prison. They were shown through several stone-paved rooms to a stone-paved court-yard, and there they waited for some time until the prisoner was brought in between two soldiers. Lemoine had thrown off his coat, and appeared in his shirt-sleeves. He was not manacled or bound in any way, there being too many prisoners for each one to be allowed the luxury of fetters.

"Ah," cried Lemoine, when he saw them, "I knew you would come if that old scoundrel of a President would allow you in, of which I had my doubts. How did you manage it?"

"The French minister got us a permit," said Dupré.

"Oh, you went to him, did you? Of course he could do nothing, for, as I told you, I have the misfortune to be a citizen of this country. How comically life is made up of trivialities! I remember once in Paris going with a friend to take the oath of allegiance to the French Republic."

"And did you take it?" cried Dupré eagerly.

"Alas, no! We met two other friends, and we all adjourned to a café and had something to drink. I little thought that bottle of champagne was going to cost me my life; for, of course, if I had taken the oath of allegiance, my friend the French minister would have bombarded the city before he would have allowed this execution to go on."

"Then you know to what you are condemned?" said the manager, with tears in his eyes.

"Oh, I know that Balmaceda thinks he is going to have me shot; but then he always was a fool, and never knew what he was talking about. I told him if he would allow you two in at the execution, and instead of ordering a whole squad to fire at me, order one expert marksman, if he had such a thing in his whole army, who

would shoot me through the heart, that I would show you, Dupré, how a man dies under such circumstances; but the villain refused. The usurper has no soul for art, or for anything else, for that matter. I hope you two won't mind my death. I assure you I don't mind it myself. I would much rather be shot than live in this confounded country any longer. But I have made up my mind to cheat old Balmaceda if I can, and I want you, Dupré, to pay particular attention, and not to interfere."

As Lemoine said this he quickly snatched from the sheath at the soldier's side the bayonet which hung at his hip. The soldiers were standing one to the right and one to the left of him, with their hands interlaced over the muzzles of their guns, whose butts rested on the stone floor. They apparently paid no attention to the conversation that was going on, if they understood it, which was unlikely. Lemoine had the bayonet in his hands before either of the four men present knew what he was doing.

Grasping both hands over the butt of the bayonet, with the point towards his breast, he thrust the blade with desperate energy nearly through his body. The whole action was done so quickly that no one realized what had happened until Lemoine threw his hands up and they saw the bayonet sticking in his breast. A look of agony came in the wounded man's eyes, and his lips whitened. He staggered against the soldier at his right, who gave way with the impact, and then he tottered against the whitewashed stone wall, his right arm sweeping automatically up and down the wall as if he were brushing something from the stones. A groan escaped him, and he dropped on one knee. His eyes turned helplessly towards Dupré, and he gasped out the words:

"My God!—you were right—after all."

Then he fell forward on his face, and the tragedy ended.

